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BY HUBERT CREEKMORE

POETRY

PERSONAL SUN (1940)

THE STONE ANTS (1943)

FORMULA

FICTION

THE FINGERS OF NIGHT

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THE LONG
REPRIEVE

and

OTHER POEMS FROM
NEW CALEDONIA

A New Directions Book

BY

HUBERT CREEKMORE

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UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS CITY REVIEW

BRIARCLIFF QUARTERLY

COMMON SENSE

PORTFOLIO

YALE POETRY REVIEW

Kanaka words in French orthography

ouamih—a meal

dinonoua—an evil spirit

plou-plou—a feast with dancing

sagies—spears

irihu—a village

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Introduction

It is good that Hubert Creekmore's war poems were not published during the war. If his superior officers in the Navy had taken the trouble to read them carefully, the ideas might have gotten him in a lot of trouble. And if the daily reviewers had gone to the same pains—an assumption almost as fanciful—the first mature expression of this fine craftsman would in all likelihood have been discussed in terms of its subject-matter alone.

For it would be a mistake to evaluate this book either entirely on the basis of its principal "subject" (the war) or of its exotic locale—an American base in French New Caledonia. Both are important, to be sure. Creekmore's immersion in soldiering and proximity to battle provided him for the first time with a large human theme. The tragedy he participated in was prodigious enough at once to lift him out of the arid objectivism of *The Stone Ants* (1943), and to call forth that discerning sympathy for the dispossessed which was the virtue of his first novel, *The Fingers of Night* (1946). At the same time the extravagant vegetation and magical simplicity of his tropic island elicited a richness of word and image that was lacking in either the early poems or the novel.

Considered solely as a "war poet" Creekmore at first reading seems to fit neatly into the tradition of irony that has informed most of the best poetry of the day—the earlier (and stronger) Eliot and Auden; Cummings and Stevens, Shapiro and Lowell. One has come to expect the bitter contrast of war's stated ideals and its means, the reduction of slogans to reality:

". . . Here is
All of war, compact.
It is simple. It is death-fear."

or

"Fear is why we fought and what we found."

One has come to expect also the contempt for the non-fighting brass, the spectacle of racial arrogance whetting its prejudices in the very act of exterminating the racially arrogant, the cartoon of the love-starved GI (a favorite Creekmere character) on a wholly frivolous sexual debauch. But there is a new note even here: the impersonal terza-rima dignity of "Music in the Rec Hut," the sympathetic identification of "Letters Home," the reluctant affirmation of "Garden of War":

Here men have lost already all beside
The eyes of some unchosen friend, but surely
Even this parasite is greater than flower fire.

Like the early work of Hart Crane which it resembles—curiously, even in titles—but which it does not appear to stem from, Creekmere's poetry is ambitious. There is the same concentration of language and strain of vision, the same effort to integrate past and present, legend and science, night and day. Pound's documentary technique (Creekmere's postgraduate work included an analysis of the metrics of the *Cantos*) may be felt in such poems as "The Log of Memory" and there is a suggestion of Rimbaud's savage derangement in "Outdoor Movie—Nouméa," but the end product—more harshly woven, and at the same time more mature in its humility—is like neither.

Harshness—a density of meaning, an eccentricity of syntax, over-intellectualized imagery and insufficiency of music in the less successful poems—is the price Creekmere is paying at this point for his ambition. In common with most serious poets today, his work suffers from fear of writing an unconcentrated line. The meaning of "The Long Reprieve" is submerged in its mood; yet the poem is just explicit enough to fail as an abstraction. "The Red Ouainth" vacillates between magic and footnotes. Phrases like "our holothurian state" and "her pantheogonic womb" reveal the intellect at work on a level closer to the dictionary than

finished poetry permits. At the other extreme—"the incidence of heroes has a definite relation to accidents"—rhythm gives way wholly to statement of fact, and the result is prose.

Creekmore himself is impatient with people to whom "music" in poetry means rhyme and a regular beat. "They do not realize," he says, "that in music the beat is *beneath* the tune—a pulse, forcible or unemphatic, or a time-duration, as required. An even balance of syllables and stress pattern gives monotony, rather than music, although it is usually considered music." His own prosody relies rather on variations within a continuous, fairly even beat—achieved by adding to or reducing the number of syllables in each foot, and by the use of light syllables on stresses, or heavier syllables on unstressed beats. He prefers to consider the stress pattern and fit the words into it "so that they sound like a kind of speech (not necessarily speech of the 'common man,' either), giving rhythmic variety and pauses where possible or where desired." This, together with the use of lines of varied length tends to give his poems an effect of syncopation or counterposed rhythms such as music produces in a 3/4 beat under a 4/4 melody.

Rhyme itself is to Creekmore less an attribute of verbal music than an aural method of indicating rhythmic structure. In his first printed book, *Personal Sun*, he experimented with "analyzed rhyme"—cross-rhyming of vowels and final consonants, as in

noon	mine	hide	dying
cool	mile	strayed	displaying

But as he worked toward the greater condensation of the present volume, avoiding the colloquial deliberately, a still more complex scheme evolved. Perhaps to echo the crossed lives of the Negro and white soldier in the powerful "It's Me, Oh Lord," the rhymes (or assonances) criss-cross:

clod-veined	freed- -om
✕	✕
drained blood	long breed

and although here the rhyme itself may escape notice entirely, the pull of the two stresses can unquestionably be felt when the poem is read aloud.

It is fitting to talk about technique a little ponderously in connection with this book, because one may assume that in Creekmore's next the machinery will be so mastered that critics will remark the facility with which difficult material is treated in a fresh way. I have done so here only to emphasize that this poet has not been satisfied to lean upon any of the fashionable pillars, and to suggest (however inadequately) the seriousness of effort and the subtlety of craftsmanship that lie behind even such apparently effortless successes as "Countryside," "Where No Bombs Fell," "Garden of War" and "Night at Sea."

Selden Rodman

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THE LONG REPRIEVE
AND OTHER POEMS FROM
NEW CALEDONIA

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II

... long ago, long ago
Before the great, great cyclone came, before
The times that any man remembered . . .

EARLY TOPOGRAPHY

Octopus of vegetation dreams
In valleys, reaching up the trickling seams
Between the scrubby brown of mountain folds
Its tentacles of greenery, and molds
The watershed as on a colored map.
Heavy clouds thrash in the upreared trap
Of peaks, and drain their substance down the veins,
Down the bouncing streams, until moraines
Of tangled mangrove mix it in the sea.
Upon the dry hills, tufted tan, debris
From old geologies outlines the ghost-
White trunks of niaouli trees. No blooded host
Except the birds to greet the first brown chief—
Kagou, earthbound and barking, and hopping leaf
Of white-eye on the branches. Silent, threaded
Down the distant canyons, like imbedded
Alabaster on the steepness, falls
The slender water over the broken walls.
Obelisks of kaori pierce the waving
Roof of tenements of trees, enslaving
In their dark chambers the jungle of death,
Hushed with the hum of dream life, its breath.
Impossible leaves and vampire vines and blooms
Like yellow caterpillars. Green hair plumes
The lowest limbs. Green daggers twist, upturn
On soaking stones. Green asterisk, tree fern,
Footnotes the sky, a word of helpless gleams
To hungry jungle dreaming, jungle of dreams.

THE RED OUAINTH

And then more moons passed, more moons than there are stars,
Days before the great, great cyclone came.
And taro grew, ignames fattened in the earth
And the coral-bottomed sea held up bright fish
To flash before the spear point.
And shell hillocks rose along the shore
Beside the banyans. Men told sometimes
A tale of long ago, long ago
Before the great, great cyclone came, before
The times that any man remembered,
A tale the dhianoua, met at night along the pathway,
Whispered in the ear.
Long ago they ate men. And more moons passed
Than there are stars.

... were times of the Great Hunger, other times
Of the Great Anger ...
When the fields withered and the roots shriveled,
And the shriveled breast would give no milk.
A time when fish caused death because of the flower
Of the coral in its tissues.
... were times when the dhianoua whispered, Long ago ...
And the hunger stirred at the silent tale no father's
Father could remember.

... a year of harvests and Techéa sat beneath the kaori tree,
Black with pride, moon-flecked.
Whispered in his ear and swimming in his body
Like a sea-moccasin, the tale untold

That flowed in the cord
From the time before the time of the great cyclone,
Promised rich gifts.
In battle, the valor of the dead descended
With the eaten fertile parts into the eater.
In the day that you eat of human flesh, dhianoua murmuring,
Then your strength shall be doubled, and you shall be
As a god, and wise and strong.
A year of harvests and there was a pilou-pilou
Where the Diahot flows into the sea
At the foot of Mount d'Arama.

Then the dance commenced, and Kaméa dancing, wore the flowers
Techéa's brother had thrown. Kéron, whose fruit he stole
When they were children, Kéron dancing and Kaméa,
And Kéron's comb in her hair.
Two bamboo combs and flowers thrown at her brown feet
And she had picked up one.
. . . danced the pilou-pilou, old man of the tribe
Murmuring, "Take your sagies," old man no one heeded.
They left their spears and the old man's murmur
To dance by the river at Mount d'Arama.

Techéa, leaning his ear to the dhianoua,
White and water-clear in the moon fall,
Felt the light leap up from the spirit lips
. . . Long ago, a tale . . . and called his men.
And when the dance was circling, Techéa
Rose up against his brother Kéron
And killed him, bird-beak of his club buried
In the bloody chest.
One by one the clubs fell till the dancing circle
Shivered on the dust and ringed the fires with death.
None but the old were left, the old who saw the fish

On banana leaves by the roasting pits of rock
Give place to warmer flesh, a new pilou-pilou.
They stuffed their throats with earth to smother:
Man had drunk man's blood; his hunger cried for more.

. . . dawned white over the blood-soaked bush, morning
Of clouds like a hundred cowri shells in the sky.
Half forgot, a tale of long ago,
All forgot, the dhianoua
Sang its hunger where men slept with no fires
In the night and much anger. Dhianoua
Never died; nor did the dawn.

. . . Dawn

Of cowri shells, long ago . . . tomorrow.

A L I K I

Against the morning sea, sea swelling in like mobile volutes of a
shell,

He stands, almost another trunk under the dark vault of banyan,
dark

By water-pearl in dawnlight: black aristocrat, warrior, bound in
spell

Induced by tribal faith, projected from his lineage to live in stark
And dread honor, hermit with the dead in custody, material
And active death, solitary in the tangle of his ethnic park.

For touching him (in youth so often sweetly touched) or resting
in his sight

(That once was met with brimming eyes) is current blasphemy,
and those who do

Must be his ward. The foulness of their bodies, severed from the
clean, unites

Society with last corruption in the burial tree. The head askew
Upon a branch, fleshy novice by the calcic skulls in silent rite
Of seaward stare, must exorcise its vagrant soul against return
to view.

Through fern before the *tribu*, paspalum that molds the seaward
hills, and past

The tendrilled vestibule into the shrine, a girl brings roasted
meats and fruit.

Beyond the tribute stone and food, her eyes are snared (like
frightened birds aghast

In acquiescence) by the sunless tapestry of skulls and rampant
roots,

And living vessel of the god of death, Alikì. Then he feels at last
The breath of life and turns, and she must close her brimming
eyes against pursuit.

Her beating feet, up the hillsides, echo ancient rivers of belief,
Echo heart's annunciation falling shell-like through the floating
course,
Falling to the certain bed of rest and love and death. In a brief
Surrender hid her permanent union with his domain: fragile in-
tercourse,
Intangible, until that day when life will go; or quicker in her
grief,
She winds her arms upon him, active once before the toll of tabu's
force.

And yet her penance, dreams Alikì, will make of her his bride,
earthly womb
In passive tactile marriage, tapestry across the banyan's vaulted
gloom.

THE *L*OG OF MEMORY

I

... rose

as rose the lemon sun
from eastern waters

the bud of brown mountains. . . .

At eight o'clock,
as we were steering to the south,
land was discovered bearing south southwest.
Colnett, midshipman, pointed it out,
dipping and swelling slowly
with every lunge of the decks,
and Captain Cook wrote it in the log
under September 4, 1774:

“in the latitude of $19^{\circ} 49'$,
longitude $164^{\circ} 53'$.”

Offshore that afternoon, becalmed,
locked out by the long, uncharted reef . . .
And three canoes under sail,
standing out to sea; but the sun
sank, and they struck sail and vanished,
and the unknown night
rocked on the flashing sea.

... eclipse of the sun drawing on,
and the Captain wanted to land for readings,

and two boats sounded the channel,
 when all that morning
 from different parts
the sailing canoes of natives gathered.
 . . . the people civil and obliging:
gave our officer some fish;
and, in return, he presented them with medals.
The channel, he said, had sixteen and fourteen
fathoms water, a fine sandy bottom.
And the *Resolution* entered the gap in the reef
 and anchored.

II

. . . swarming canoes, the natives naked
but for a cloth or leaf between the thighs;
 few bearing weapons:
and we lured them with presents lowered on ropes
and two ventured on board the ship.
Then others came and offered
 fish that stunk intolerably,
and several sat to dinner with the Captain.
But pea-soup, salted beef and pork
they had no curiosity to taste.

dogs and cats, leaping and creeping
about the decks, and hogs and goats,
 impounded at the stern,
 aroused their admiration,
awed their eyes, and they whispered and chattered.
Ghosts, the animals might have been, of dead
 ancestors,
for all we knew, knowing not their language;
and we, perhaps, were spirits too,

to judge their shy respect,
returned from the isles of paradise.
And so we gave them spike nails
which they fancied, and red cloth.

. . . received our Captain with great courtesy
ashore, and no signs of malicious intent.
Teeabooma, being their chief,
spoke a welcome to surge of murmuring syllables
from the population;
and here was fresh water, and here plantains,
and here sugar cane and yam fields;
and Captain heard the crowing of cocks,
but saw none.
Mr. Forster shot a duck flying overhead.
Well, these men had never seen a gun—
you can imagine. . . .

Next day about one P. M. the eclipse
came on and they observed it from the offshore
island called by the natives Balabea.

III

“About seven o’clock this evening,
died Simon Monk, our butcher,
a man much esteemed in the ship;
his death being occasioned by a fall
down the fore-hatchway the preceding night.”

. . . sick of tasting a strange sun-fish
bought of a native spearer
were our Captain and two officers;
and a pig died of eating the entrails.

IV

Civilities (we hoped they were)
continued: Captain brought a
red and white dog and a red bitch
to Teeabooma.

Mr. Forster went out botanizing
in the gray and white forests
and in the green jungle strips.

And on the 12th, Captain left
a sow and a boar with the chief
and explained in gesture
the virtues of porcine fertility.
The compliment was returned in six yams.

. . . on a large tree by the beach
cut our ship's name and the date,
took leave of the natives
and put to sea in the morning,
sailing down the coast . . .

found the Isle of Pines
at the lower tip of the great island.
Storm threatened, the season
of cyclones on us, and our supplies
were low and repairs needed.
"Thus I am obliged," Captain told us,
"first time in my voyages,
to leave a coast I have discovered,
before it is fully explored."

He called it New Caledonia.

"MUSIQUE DE LA TRANSPORTATION"

Clockwise and counter the circles revolved
Round the kiosk in the park,
Wheeling of human roulette; for the plague
Scarcely had lifted and still might strike
Although the rats had been burned.

Uniforms, medals and braid were gleaming,
Ranged on conservative benches,
Scanning the rings of Kanakas and Japs
And Javanese strolling beneath the trees—
Formality blinking at brilliance.

Then came the orchestra, twenty-five convicts
Filing in gray to the platform.
Music began, musicians unbarred,
"Intermezzo"—while the sarongs and Mother
Hubbards swayed from the hips.

The English traveler, dined at the *Cercle*,
Sat in amazement, muttered:
Pitazy, that conductor, jealously fed
His wife on the heart of an innocent friend.
(Rest, oh Procne, he lied.

Chameleon crime with a finger touch
Changes its color, is relative
To every person, idea and moral,
Since these are so various, in our various
Disjointed world, and unknown.)

"How can you have," he inquired of the girl,

"This assortment of villany, death
And rapine entertain you with concerts at night?"

"M. Griffiths," she said, "*nous écoutons*

A la musique, pas au crime."

Aghast in his guilt at the tender souls

Of criminals, horrified

At the shaken dogmas of man and of sin,

The forgotten traveler sailed. And sailed

Before his day two convicts:

And we remember them—Rochefort

And Louise Michel, imprisoned,

Because of the music they felt, by men

Who jumped in the dance of vice—remember,

While American bands play today.

II

*Now, in a foreign land,
The fighter wends in words the ties
That wrote the meaning of his life . . .*

N O U M E A M O R N I N G

. . . emerge like stately butterflies from gates
Drenched in bougainvillea, purple waterfall,
From shuttered doors where every shuttered window
Keeps night evils from the house, parades
Of Javanese *bajous* to the market stall

Emerge with flutter of sarong, design
Of bias tendrils to waver every slippered tread,
Float between the pink and yellow houses,
Corrugated roofs peeling red,
Beneath tree-crotches smothered by the giant vine

Philodendron, beside a blood-leafed hedge,
Promiscuous hibiscus, and the creamy stars
Of night-washed frangipani, float and waver
Deepening in the sun . . . by shady wedge
Triangling streets, with lint-littered *arbres noires*,

Place du Marché usurped by a soldier canteen
And grind of military trucks on every side
Like chains in fiendish gear . . . to some other
Market now, by boats on a silver tide,
For string-hung goggling fish of silver and rose patine.

. . . returning, meet, as down the hills, below
The clustered burning bells of *pomelel canaque*,
Along ravines with watered ribs greening,
Medusa of cactus on the lava brow,
Come the children in khaki shorts and flowered frocks,

Toward *l'Ecole Communale*, to school,
Meet and pass, mingling—swinging books criss-cross
The flapping fish—mix and part. The pupils
Rank before the meager building, pause
In young salute, Tricolor up the limited pole

And qualifying banner of Lorraine.
Upsurge of business comes, bicycles that converge
Along the brown belt of trucks—merchant,
Clerk and typist by the open drain,
Wheeling to the worker's clock, in silence emerge. . . .

L E T T E R S H O M E

*They speak French here, so I can't talk to anyone . . .
... no big trees, just some scrub they call neeooleys . . .*

I

Now, in a foreign land,
The fighter winds in words the ties
That wrote the meaning of his life,
Enriching it, so he presumed,
With attitudes he cannot spell.
Emotions suicide by magic
When they face a verbal system.

Jute twines with the blossoms bloomed
In artificial tanks of home, whose
Affections yearn in movie guise,
To vitaminize the lean feelings
With a letter. Yes; he "takes his pen in hand";

But what can he say who never felt anything to say?
Or he who never had to make the words to say it?
A middleman had always handled their expression—
 The grower of Mother's Day flowers,
 The sewer of Father's Day ties,
 The odor of Christmas perfumes,
 The chromo of greeting card verse.
And so these thousands of letters
Shuttle between the inarticulate
Outposts of war and well-swept firesides—

Procession of dried and inky characters
Epic in its pathos.

The shoulders shadow paper
Chaste for warm confession;
The pen props in the fingers,
Ink awaits the art.
But grinding thought unshapes in arctic words
The love that tenderly should burst,
Visibly, achingly, like the cereus
Spreading its cloud on rose-stained wall.

Our faith redeems our failure:
We have embraced the rite,
Stayed unfamiliar to its spirit.

II

Footnotes to economics *I enclose*
two dollars or no pay since San Francisco
and I need some shaving cream, so please
send me a dollar if you can spare it.

Statistics have not placed these in a context with
afraid you're stepping out with other men . . .
I'm sending you my pay, not playing around
and you better stay true to me. Do you
go out with them? Is Buck hanging around?
Do you—?

Acid in the arteries. And heart acidified:
"Boy-does-he-know-how-to-handle-women!"
Mails a brief note to his wife, and four
Of postcard passion to four pick-ups.

And the milk of doubt which starts each sentence
"Darling . . .

Boyish, they bound with the village church,
The courthouse square, the meadow streams,
The sitting room, their world.
The circumscription gave them strength;
It wound upright their weakness.
*Has Rosa had her calf? . . . John help you with
the harvest?*

And bravado filtered through the sieve
Of newspaper propaganda.
The circle breaks:

*Although I only saw you twice,
you are my ideal girl. I dream of you
every night . . . wonder if you're mad
you haven't answered my last three letters.
It's over three months now—*

The pitiful veil,
Held out by lonely hands, can never cover
That fugitive flesh. Homespun. Rayon.

P OCKET GUIDE FOR SERVICE MEN

"... are not molesters of women" the book says,
Balancing in its hopefulness the rape
That spirals in the eye when women pass.

The tower of morale, as plotted in
A filing cabinet, skitters when
The first wind of custom touches it,

And is a sheaf of blowing papers. We,
Who value only sex and money, feed
Our own disaster with decreed pretense.

The sailor, under the feathers and scarlet bloom
Of flamboyants, invites the French girl
To whoredom, if she does not know his tongue.

The soldier thinks all women prey for him,
But prays within himself for one. The game
Has spare reward, win or lose, but shame.

Not hemispheric in its cause, it effects
A geographic contrast. Movie-fostered,
Pulp-fed, dreaming of money and sex,

We live the lives of virile American Men—
An emptiness of mirror-maze reflecting
The wretched ritual of the pool room punk.

Here the pioneering spirit finds

Its last, debased residence, and blind
To honor, honors nothing, so is honored.

It is too late to teach a fighter love
When he must kill. It is too much to build
Respect where none has been, or been owed.

S TAGE, ACTORS, AUDIENCE

A smoky dawn, and on its dark the light
Oozes mucously between conjunctive
Grills of the corner butcher shop. The slim
Shadow of iron rails radiates
Like ribs of a fan across the ashy walk
And drip of nocturnal gutters. Warm haunches
Of animals lately slaughtered hang from rafters.
Between these fleshy wings the butchers move
Upon their intermittent stage with cleavers.

Two Javanese shuttle in the sun from docks
On Moselle Bay to a ramp before a garage,
With hobbled silent sheep astraddle their necks.
They range the bodies ballet-style from tree
To rusty springs and oil drums. Sheep-hearts—
Docile population—their unconcerted
Panting the frantic pulse of gray pistons
In the amorphous engine of their fortune.
Now a final one is dropped in place;
And breathing a long breath, he shudders as if
Of all he were the only one that knew.

Blue eyes, kindled under the sallow brow
Of New Caledonian child, flicker on
The wooly forms. Her bare feet move, spread
Their toes, move in apoplectic dance.
One finger enters her nostril, points and probes
The nostril again, as if in this hypnosis
It had freed dark intuition's secret.

Through a wincing mouth she whispers, "*Voyez
Qu'ils me regardent!*" and distantly she leans
About them, piercing toward their mole-skin eyes.
Her feet shift here and there, her finger curls,
And in her dance, she twines the front of her skirt.

ROW FIVE, GRAVE TWO

Above the mangrove swamp, the cemetery,
Spreading to the hillside's western berm,
Twinkles a sea of flags that would confirm
The clay-bound offered hope of these we bury

In a strange earth, far from home. Screening
Foreign foliage will never shroud
The common sky that floods with sun and cloud
The fighter's final station. But turf is greening

As in their favorite parks and pastures. No burning
Tree will drop a scarlet pall, no vine's
Exotic leaf about each cross entwine:
Sun-glint sod is home's closest returning.

In stony beds on Attu lie their brothers,
In vaults of crowding jungle green are dressed.
Mounds in Africa drift with desert unrest:
The bloody coral crown, Tarawa, smothers

A thousand heroes' heads. From these inventoried
Graves; from those who flag-wound slid beneath
The waves, in blast of science vanished, wreath
Of fire about each cell, in bones ungloried,

Alone, unknown, rest in mystic communion:
From all, earth-girdling as the parallels,
Is no vital knot of purpose to swell,
Triumphant cord of their mortal union

Through a mad geography of divers
Wars? We may have sealed in with these dead
A purpose in their death. It may have fled
Into the tomb, fearful of survivors'

Apathy when peace has come, and guarded
Its memorial against the hold
Of minds that memorize control and gold.
Its home is here, among the graves, greenswarded.

Lacking sounder monuments, caretakers
Will tend our hollow testimony, keep
The grass trim, and let the pilgrim weep
At "Row 5, Grave 2" in acres

Of intentions solemnly entombed. We suffer
No caretaker for our spirit, miss
No money spent on graves and archives. This
Is all that we who bury you can offer:

A sign for country, a sign for love and pain,
A sign for life. And if there be no more
Than a neat plot and record, God rest you, for
This is the ancient deathless tale again:

A million young hearts gone for nothing.

A VENUE GEORGES CLEMENCEAU

(Nouméa)

At noon the stores, as in a Mississippi town
Of childhood days, are closed, and sidewalks, shaded
By a roof or balconies (that town again),
Are porticos almost unpopulated.

The military guests have swarmed the new PX
To eat ice cream, or buy brioche from neighbor
Jus de Fruit du Soldat, alive with yellow paint,
Screeching jive. Two MP's gloom on the corner.

When tropic sleep has gone, the shops lift up their blinds
And shuttered cases, unashamed of empty
Shelves or tawdry trinkets hallmarked Uncle Sam.
The betel teeth of Tonkin women, tempting

Sailors with a bracelet, match their trousered dress.
Across a fence of metal sheet, hibiscus
Trees, warty-barked, dole their petals, limp
Like melting butter pats. Inertia is mistress.

The French withdraw behind their mogrified facades
Of livid window frames and swollen pillars.
Kanakas, suited as for basketball, awake
And yawn beside the lilies in Place d'Orly

And saunter, holding hands to ward a witch's charm.
A mother—Javanese indentured labor—

Packs her child astride the hip in a slung sarong;
Gold coins, hairpinned, solicit fortune's favor.

Where the street splits round the fountain's arid bowl
The goddess tilts her stony horn of riches.
The lip is choked; and from her loins lately flow
Electric lines more fecund than her marble niches.

NIGHT SPOT

Above them all she sees the languid hand—
The air-shaped hand drooping as if to take
A sweet-meat—idly closing over the instant
Of their years the timeless bones of death.

The young men, laughing one more night, are gods
Around the cocktail bar. To her they gleam
In sentimental lights and music, flame
Like Icarus against the murdering void.

Such radiance the tomb never shed
Around a tenant as now, by its threat,
Aureoles their manhood and the hunger
Of her pantheogonic womb. But sterile

Her conception since her hunger feeds
On symbols: through all the barren nights she winds
Her shroud of thighs about the men who wait
To lie in closer beds with barren Death;

For she is concubine with Death in war's
Debasement. Her hysteric greed blasphemes
The foggy shrine of life; these fighters pour
Their blood libations for so little—so few.

Her arms, that in a calmer day would shame,
Twine about the aviators' throats
Like strangling scarves outblown from Kali's robes;
And she and they forget . . . forget . . . forget.

E COLE COMMUNALE — BOURAIL

Piggy-back, piggy back,
In the prison yard.
Tag, tag, fierce attack,
Run behind the guard.

Recessed from class in which their treble monotone
In unison "*les cygnes*" droned, "stretched out their necks
Like serpents . . ." children leap at games, cry in their own
Abandon, still untangled in the incestuous wreck

Of cultures. Where they play, by walls mouldering black,
Sparsely grows the grass—no other thing, nor tree
On hill behind. Here once walked a wretched pack
Of women sent by France to prison across the sea.

(Back and forth, up and down,
In the prison yard . . .
Wait, weep, days will drown,
Eyes and heart be scarred.)

Today they jump, run piggy-back like centaur colts
In capers, on their heads olive soldier caps
To key them to a war whose hidden threat revolts
No more in them than dress. Some far mother, perhaps,

They think not of, paced this paddock while convict eyes,
Drunk with near parole, through a crevice chose
A colonial bride. Straw hats, round and ribboned, cries
Of children, chasing games now fill the prison close.

"Reviens! Reviens!" laugh and call
To players galloping by.
Run, play, the blackened walls
Don't yet shut out the sky.

At the bell clang, a last drink from the cistern fed
By rain-spout in the eaves—stooping, spraddled, cup
Of palms—and march to class: to read, with no more dread
Than when they ran from It, "stretched serpent necks
and *houp!*

Dans le bassin des cygnes," in reedy chant, and dream
Only swans of kindness. The yard is haunted now
By sunshine, steeping from sod of time sorrows that seem
To call "Come back!" as in a desperate game, and vow

The breath of innocence will drown an age of distress.
"Reviens!" the children's cry floods over the walls of time
"Come back, come back!" and washes with their artlessness
The black of ancient wrongs—eternal anodyne:

Piggy-back, piggy-back,
In the prison yard.



UTDOOR MOVIE — NOUMEA

The senile shadow of a vigorous time
Lurks about the mountain slope.
Whining for distant days
We crowd the amphitheatre to gaze
At shadow actors who will mime
The modern satyr play.

Strophes from the mask of celluloid
Curl with promise through the tiers.
Cothurnus in high heels
Tapdances to the cymbals, and ordeals
Of love drench those lips enjoyed
But never touched by ours.

Around our emptiness we draw the disguise
Of movies. Oh, men at Thermopylae,
This hero is a ghost.
And all are lost upon the hillside, lost
Beneath the dance of gigantic thighs
Projected on our will.

Shadows, watching shadows, imitate,
Drain their dwindling substance through
Each others' pallid cores.
Beyond the eastern range the great moon pours
On screen of clouds, then breaks, great
Cascade of longing, to

The desert of our dreams, breaks that screen
Hiding the world of man from man,
And probes the only real
We know within ourselves. Its mirrors steal
Us from the hypnotist. The lean
Sinews knot and wake.

WHERE NO BOMBS FELL . . .

Where no bombs fell, no conquerors marched,
 No tanks rolled,
 The old folk slept except
For sinking dreams that cried, "My son, my son!"

Where no guns spat at citizens
 Against a wall,
 No laws forbade the mind,
The children slept and dreamed no dreams of pain.

Where airplanes snarled no song of death
 Across the moon
 Young women neither slept
Nor dreamed, but cried to the night, "O lover, husband!"

A kind of peace, a kind of war—
 Anemic balance
 Teetered by the selfish—
Wherein the fear of what may come preserves

Alike the politician and
 The nightmare of
 The village architect.
The trees are spared, but what is cured by war

Remote except in sacrifice?
 No evil dies,
 No good is born—
Folly of monuments intact in stone.

THE *L*AST LETTER

These forms she does not recognize.
The china trees, the dusty street,
The unhinged gate, melt in her eyes.
My son, her lips repeat.

The letter cracks before her face.
Official words of sympathy
Signed by a stranger, can not replace
The touch of humanity.

The curling mite, the child at the gate,
The boy who helped to wash the clothes,
The man who came from loving late
And gay, is gone with those

Who die in battle. Neighbor friends
Will murmur for her ease, but will
Not question why his life should end
By a stream in Bougainville.

Anonymous his deed, suppressed
The sacrifice and pain. For no
Community of honor rests
In those who will it so.

He died for a land whose word was false,
But his country, his work, his anguish. Yet
The conflict in his heart exalts
The motive and the debt.

His mother wipes her dark stained cheek.
White folks' cooks better not be late.
"Us niggers" move when patricians speak:
Life and grief must wait.

MUSIC IN THE REC HUT

The pen stops in a phrase of a letter home,
The magazine drops in the sailor's lap,
Its romance defeated. Talk and jokes become

Lost in inner moods, as music wraps
The men in shining cords that wind
Back overseas like hungry roots to sap

The strength of distant earth. It is behind
Their eyes the music lives, the frieze
Of Tin Pan tunes evolving scores designed

More human than all symphonies. The keys
Fling out from the upright cataracts
Of memory in every nimble piece.

Boogie-woogie, rhumba and waltz attack
The forfeit past and rout out nights
Of Negro piano in a dim café, and shacks

For barbecue across America, sights
Of lonely childhood, dancing, kiss
Of lips in tree-spread dark, the wife who died

Last week, good times and good friends. For this
Is not the song of radio,
Whose texture conjures merchandise, whose voice

Is advertising. Here the song is no
Barren orchestration of guile,
But is woven with the tones that flow

From each man into it: how the bile
Of sorrow burned them, alchemy
Of love and laughter gilded the body's vial.

Through gray smoke clouds the men stare. Each eye
Entreats the curving walls to part
On the giant swirl of Scorpio in the sky,

And the sting of night and starlight in every heart.

CONDUCTED, ALL-EXPENSE TOUR

Committed to a worship of change,
We travel only to buy the picturesque,
To pump with ego-air the tire
Absorbing the shock of life by electric devices.

The spoon with the Eiffel Tower handle
Or Niagara Falls in its bowl, the string of pearls
From Pacific Isles, the censer from temples
In China, are ticket-stubs to line on a shelf

In the what-not of the mind. They gather
Dust in the sweep of years, for travelers
Like us grab the souvenir
And not the understanding. So we never

Know what Paris meant, or incense
In the shrine, or sea-worked necklaces,
Or honeymoons, or even spoons;
It is always time to go to newer places.

Now on a Cook's Tour far more grim
Than ever travel bureau planned, men
In vain search out the pregnant trinket
Holding the heart of this bewildered trip.

There's no curio of the Coral Sea,
But waves washing the light from a sailor's eyes.
There's no Lover's Leap in the Solomons:
It is a flaming falling air man.

What souvenirs we now collect—
Strings of shells that burst the throat to blood,
Bullets that scorn our raucous pride,
Last sight of a world turned smoke and roar—

Line the mocking what-not where
Our true relation to man parades its text.
This blasted leg, this blackened brain,
This blotted sight, this bric-a-brac of a dead

Bombed soldier . . . “We picked these up in New Guinea.”

COUNTRYSIDE

The island is covered with washing.
Every Kanaka shack has nailed a sign
LAUNDRY to fence or tree; and hung on a line
Between gum-oak and gaiiac,

Khaki and olive trousers
Flap out a sober Alabama-coon-jig. Where
Are hidden the soldiers who have so much to wear?
No camps are hereabout—

Mountain and woodland and cabins
With simmering pots of clothes. The helpless streams,
Bubbling milky with soap below scrubbing frames,
Filter on bird's-nest fern roots.

Under a pentice of palm thatch,
Loblolly women in swinging-bell skirts pursue
The intimate washing of drawers and pressing of u-
niforms. Bouncing of flesh never mind

The soldiers who stroll in for service,
Their jeep at the gate below. They bewilder the hounds,
Unschoolled in American dog-talk, with their sounds;
Their French does no less to the natives.

Economy hurdles those dangers
While kindness blinks and shrinks away in alarm.
The children fan charcoal to keep the irons warm,
And peep at the great grinning strangers.

A VE, AD INFINITUM

The incidence of heroes has a definite relation to accidents.
The factors are present. Given the quality of men
The production of heroes would climb to millions
On the assembly line of war—a cumbersome number.

The private in a foxhole, hungry and fevered but constant,
Is not enshrined in publicity especially after
The enemy's fire has found him. The nearest
Of kin gets a form telegram. Such death has no sales value.

The pilot who downs a covey of airplanes is wined
In Hollywood, displayed at the government's command,
Paraded to spur the sale of war bonds
To people who cherish heroes ready-made in the gross.

The reference is no longer to the character,
Action's catapult of virtues, but
To a single temporal point detached
From daily meanness and bloated by the press into a poultice.

The trick is to know how to die—knowledge too often
Put to use. The fertile circumstance
Allowing distinction is denied
Too many soldiers who got no lauding parade but died.

THE PARADE

So rise from plotting death now and celebrate
That earlier pause of war whose first parade moved
Up New York's path to forgotten pastures through drift
Of ticker tape and cast-off papers. Mark the date
That ended wars and annually observe the proved
Triumph when the diplomatic thuribles whiffed
Pacific incense. Oh, we need this habit of drums
If we are to hide the clamoring bones beneath costumes.

Derisive pageantry of hope long obsolete,
The lines march by Nouméa's soldier monument.
Do they salute the pompous officers, erect
For many nations, with fresh wreathes about their feet,
Or hail the dead whose names have shrunk to eloquent
Incisions on the stone? The ceremonies project
The wish, the order (lost through bred incompetence,
Dichotomy of action and ideal), the sense.

This is the sense, though tentative, the ritual
To screen the heretics: procession, flags and bands:
The French and their Kanakas, Americans black and white,
Australians and New Zealanders. . . . Visual
Harmony of color, sex and country expands
Across the route, till tanks and mobile guns invite
The afterpiece of boy-and-girl-scouts blooming pride,
Freshly wreathed in hope, the true parade inside.

The generals, the admirals, done with salutes,
Now abandon the wreathes about the cenotaph.

The rites have been observed, martial protocol
Is satisfied. The crowd breaks from its dream, recruits
Its closer, tougher tenets, disperses with a laugh.
The formal column cracks into divisible
Commands, on back streets marching languorous and strangely
 gay.
And elders lead their children home to antiseptic play.

Nouméa, November 1943

GARDEN OF WAR

Flower of fire, of instantaneous generation
From seed of iron to powder bloom and spray
Of piercing pollen fragments, your fulfillment
Does not end with smoking petals in the sky.

That hard pollen, in its springing, germinates
The seed of death in men whose charring entry
Into earth sprouts as hard sorrow
In some distant heart. Your cycle is not short

Nor natural in plants. Monster blossom, you
Must breed in metamorphoses like
The butterfly, feed on life and love
Before their hate matures into the shell bud.

Parasite along your spreading poison branches,
Rootless as an orchid, grows another
Flower, desperate before your hunger,
Fearless of its foreseen destiny. Men,

In this perverted botany, denied communion,
Waiting to become the phase of death
In your unnatural growth, must pour out love,
Uprooted plants forcing a last withered bloom.

Perhaps they waste their tender words upon a dog
Bounding careless on a beach-head; or
Within a woman's letter fossilize
The cotyledon of their love; or in night skies

And constellations penetrate a milky mirror.
Here is lost already all but the touch
Of some unchosen friend, the eyes of yes
And living—monster of living dwarfing flower fire.

9 T'S ME, OH LORD, STANDING WITH A GUN

They crouch in the barge and the palms roll close,
Green echo, high over sand, of waves,
Of gray jelly-fish in smoke puffs whose
Invisible sting is swift and leaden.

They crouch, tongue-dry, in the boat,
And all the world is a puny beach-head:

World of clean-sliced hemispheres,
Of latitudes of love and crime,
Peopled with the mental smears
Of medieval magic, thinning
To a short horizon
Under war's tremendous engine.

That glittering hierarchy down
Through which the war blood streams, and great
Einsteinian logistics, drown
Upon this coast of conquest. Here is
All of war, compact.
It is simple. It is death-fear.

Undiscriminating death
Appraises his approaching guests,
Uniform in gear, beneath
Which shiver bodies, black and white skinned,
But uniform in value
As currency of life. Their insight

Penetrates the island's pull,
Magnetic jointure of here-after.
Across the rail, the Negro full
In death's face stares and blinks, beside him
 Son of owners of slaves,
Floating to a mortal hyphen, tongue-tied.

And the hyphen joins the puzzled past:
The tired way down which they came,
Twin exiles of historic trust—
And fades in the jungle's blinding chaos.

 For on that final range
Men sprawled, too patient in the wave lay,

Letting the gently anxious foam
Entomb their scars in sand. No scales
Enamel the minds of two from whom
All memory soon may flee. The Negro
 And the Southern man
Reflect how inner bondage subtly

Links them to oppose what fought
At home between them: tenant house
Of jerried boards, and house it wrought
Of moonbeam pillars; loom of clod-veined
 Overalls that wove
Tradition's silky gown. The drained blood

Mirrors doubly self and war,
Retreating in the glasses to
Extinction. The Negro fighting for
A freedom fraud, the white for freedom
 Mortgaged to mistrust,
Fight to shield the bigot's long breed.

Palm surf roaring at their face,
The Negro felt, not as on slaves,
The white hand on his arm, and heard him:
 "We can do it, can't we?"
And some familiar thing was lost words.

The strakes grate on the shore, defy
Horizon turned foreground of slaughter.
*Whether I, the Negro, lie
Here or return, by all these tokens,
 Medals are for white men,
Jim Crow life for me and my folk.*

Upon the coral shingle they leap
And rush the smoking jungle. Round
Their legs the salt-curled break and seep,
Crumbling soon the mold of foot-prints.
 Streaks of red, shell-studded,
Blot in sand, in waves are washed mute.

F E A R I S W H Y

Fear is why we fought and what we found:
These industries of waste produce but fear
 Whether in their bomber's sound
Or in the film of desires they have wound
About us. You will find no heart here.

The mind has been unmanned. It never appraised
This toilet of the ages we have made
 But called it super world. Shamefaced,
Afraid of death by gadgets, we embraced
The onanistic glories of gold braid.

We could not see behind the flag they waved.
We did not know then the paradox
 Of killing what you swore you saved.
The military breed, emblem engraved
With rutting, greed and murder, easily shocks.

Drop the pose, Gold Braid. A whole man
Wants something more than a sure thing at three
 Bucks a throw—more than
Historic regulations to command
Respect. A good heart is sound guarantee.

We found it out although an awful lot
Of blood it took to show us. Love isn't sex,
 Love isn't the movies, love is what
We hid ashamed in human youth, forgot,
Betrayed to guilt-edged sewer architects.

But their securities no longer leech:
Without love there is always fear.

Behind war's inhumanity, each
Of us, relieved of money's fear, could reach
Again to human-kindness, could find it near.

In years of cringing peace its fresh imprint,
Strange with life, will shine in the darkening night;
And most will know how close they went
To the simple secret of a man's intent.
But we are dumb in the factory of fright.

The honest arm crooked round our shoulder will
Endure, though we, afraid, may bury it deep.
Its nobler paradox—to kill
By rules taught us something of love—until
A day of faith, must hide in the heart and sleep.

THE *L*ONG REPRIEVE

In folding in the rocky cove it comes
A bubbled syrup streaking green across
And in with cloudy curls impetuous
And urgent, volatile chrysanthemums

Along the ledges, out with sucking rush
Resisting still indrawn upswelled and crested
Descends in a long suspiration of pain unrested
For a distant moon. The algal plush

Of shelving stone conforms its nap to tides.
Molluscan colonies shape brooches here—
Sea-slugs and snails and squid. And where each tier
Is creviced rolls the bloated worm with hide

Of black chenille and innards milky whorled.
And black and burry urchins, brain of coral,
Coral skeleton, suffuse with floral
Apathy their wave-worried world.

Under the undulant flux these habitants
Are animated from paralysis
As if they strove at anchors. Oh, but this
Is light's illusion: this, the mortal trance

Of men in war, intermediate
The glare of battle's fusion pyre and lasting
Glow of passion's selfish purpose. A wasting
Cove shuts in our holuthurian state.

Across the hungry shoals the dead moon sweeps
The surfs of memory (rich ocean-source
Of life) in dolloping foam to lay their force
On stony growth, refract its torpid deeps.

So from the westward tides the spindrift piles
On shore. It could be violet leaves—far stain
Of seaweed—cool and morning wet again
Around a child's wrist, slivering, while

His fingers search the flower's crisp stem
And raise a smell of wood and earth. That garden,
Long ago and occult, with its warden
Hedge and weeping trees presides on dim

Reality. Its monstrous gothic house
Is surely veined with secret doors, with stairs
As dark as gulfs. But from the unaware
Of violets the child cannot arouse.

Then spume of spring breaks on familiar trees,
Whose black arms held the sorrow of winter nights,
Now feathered in fearless youth; on clouds and kites
And reaching things of green, on crocuses,

On bottom pastures buttoned with clover, on creeks
Where crawfish pile their doors, on nests new-made
And roadside thickets of plum, on red thorn, blade
Of jonquil, roots reborn—it spills and breaks.

Now sways upon the sea a kelp of flats
In brownstone fronts and traffic's solitude,
Where phosphorus of love adorns the crude
And snaky night with stars. It was in that

Mysterious light those common things could blaze
Like visionary gear: the brush that strands
Her tangled hair, a book in shell-thin hands,
The window herbs, a shoe. They'll not always

Beget a luster: nor her touch, transcending
The time—such time he knows, while his senses
Feed but bleed his heart. Their best pretenses
Could not stifle the seed of early ending.

The weave of sun-shot waves is web more cold
Than firelight at the family hearth where sleep
The old forgiven manners that knit him deep
And docile in their unaccountable hold:

The street lamp winks through elms, and here are rocking
Chairs on a small-town porch, the men's cigar
Smoke trailing gray in moonlight, tales of far
Childhood and youth heard in childhood mocking

Far from now—picnics, excursions through
Ravines, partridge hunts in burnt-leaf air,
Adventures in haunted words, jack-o-lanterns' glare
At dusk. —Such picayune foundations do

Not demonstrate their magnetism. These,
A native matter and nativity,
Caught to hearth, shaped whatever he
Before that altar is. Though double distances

From home he flee, the father's tempered sense,
The mother's yield of beauty's hunger, weight
The Janus course with their precipitate—
An apotheosis of residence.

From that enveloping design still pours
The stream of buried life past all the shining
Islands—root of home, childhood's catkin, twining
Love—in tireless tides on inner shores.

From these tremendous depths creatures crawled
When none but wind and water owned a speech.
From these tides again the vernal reach
Of generation breaks on the stagnant mold.

The great waters fold and roll as fresh
As in their distant first impulse. Each wave,
Intimate in origins, bursts grave
And white with comet-tails and throws a mesh

Around the severed heart. Such is the flood
Whose ebbing bears anew the life curtailed
By war, insistent on the values failed.
Soon leave this temporary fossil in its mud,

Oh currents rushing through these caverns, leave
The wrack on selvedge drying, leave the sand
Dollar on the sand. The living land
Is still our soil, and this our long reprieve.

III

*But someone leaves, someone is left, endures
The jungle of characters, the jig-saw scenes,
The always endings, always overtures.*

SAILING

The bruised shore moves slowly off our port.
A sulphurous snake from the nickel plant
Rides the sky across the harbor.
Sprawling Ile Nou, where penal barracks rot
Among nests of Quonset huts,
Recedes in unreality. Interior mountains,
Misted blue in the early sun,
Rise behind the fingered peninsula.
In the buzzing of their forests I have sat
And heard an unseen bird cry once.

Bruised island of bruised people,
New Caledonia is now a place in wonder.
Beyond the ship's rail a cyclorama reels the landmarks.
Far, there, on Anse Vata beach, where green
Lapping calms the mind, hospital
Eyes are dreaming on our sea-splashed hull.
Ouen Toro's summit signals with a flashing light.
Mont D'Or, a chocolate loaf
That we once set to climb,
Slides up to guard the Bay of Boulari.
And in the center cove St. Louis Mission
Hovers over rice and taro fields.
In its flower-ridden native village
The Kanaka carving a cross gave us
Papayas and bananas. "*C'est un don,*"
He said and asked *un dollar* for the communal fund.

Uneasy people, masked in a riddled past . . .
In Thio, under the broad trees I walked,

In Canala, La Foa and Bourail.
Between the apricot walls of Nouméa
So many times I went, watching the faces
Of Kanaka, Tonkinese, Javanese and French,
But never was close to the center.
War had put armies in residence
Between my question and your truth.
In town you profiteered on cheap gewgaws;
But on a lonely mountain pass, road workers
Showered our car with local oranges . . .
Uneasy people, stooge of foreign interest,
A nightmare lies in your siesta.

At Madame Collard's farmhouse dinners
(How luxurious an omelet was!)
Were served in Javanese tranquility
By Sará. "Ah," she cried,
"*Je suis mariée* . . . Foo! Crazee boy!"
Along the reef, almost at vanishing point,
Breakers roll a variant white line.
Indigo sparkle rounds the sandy, shrubby pastille
That bases the iron cylinder of Amedée Light.
Under that ledge of palms the town called Plum
Turned out to be a roadside stand
With good tea and cucumber sandwiches.
And now, the mouth of Rivière des Pirogues
Where, beyond the saw-mill
A clear swimming hole swept below
A diving board in a fork of pandanus.
That hill across, the map marked "Opals here"
But there was no bridge or road.
Prony lies beyond.
The tumbling canyon above Yaté
Does not sluice the electric turbines. . . .

So much I saw, so much attempted,
But where was your motive heart?
Not to be found in recollection and not offered
In the carnival of contact. The pageant has passed
And left the scene unlighted and strange.
Now, for me, it will blur behind
The stunted trees and space. But for you,
Uneasy, bruised people—for you—?

Through Woodin Passage the gray ship turns,
And the mottled hills hang close:
Red slashes, yellow washes scar the steep slag,
Relics of mineral search.
The narrow channel curls behind;
Our radar sweeps the pie-pan sea.
Here is the break in the ring of coral,
And the gray hills will drown in the gray tides.
The pilot debarks in a trailing boat.
Down from the yard-arm flutters How.

A L W A Y S O V E R T U R E S

Always are endings, always overtures—
Scenario of nonsense, acts of dismay,
The quick, the slow curtain, the interlude—
A macaronic, tragi-comic play.

Turbid cities of our homeland lighted
Magic faces over cocktail bars—
Fading faces, downy sacrifices
To defenders, giddiness of wars.

The sudden friends, now old ones are so scattered,
Dwindle with the footlights in the trough.
You saw what could have been (essential magnet)
If rules of battle gave you time enough.

Austral islands, school-book islands, press
Their jungles round each camp, press to blind
The weeding eye. You have them now, just as
You did—the tangled faces far behind.

Man talk with your friends, sweettalk your girls,
But someone leaves, someone is left, endures
The jungle of characters, the jig-saw scenes,
The always endings, always overtures.

NIGHT AT SEA

Yellow lingers behind the gray ambush
Of clouds that squat along the horizon.
The hidden sun inscribes on their curls a rune
Of Persian characters in neon.

Overhead the splay of light, withdrawing
Slowly on the axis, departs
A darkening abyss where red Antares
Soon will pulse the Scorpion's heart.

Venus burns in Virgo, anomaly
So bright she sears a flecking path
Across the sea. The ship, between two deeps,
Pursues its solitary track.

Of all that gulf of stars, only here
Is conscious life; and how alone
On this secretive water the vessel steers
Its wake, blacked-out and tossing and gone.

On deck, the pudgy words of selfish warriors
Plan to breed monopolies of cash.
Veterans of no battles hug their power.
(Death's pupils never live to teach.)

Knotted in their nets, the stars draw tight,
But man is light-years from his kind.
The black mast rocks against the empty night,
Ponderously stabbing the silent blind.

C O N C E R T A T S E A

Although the ship's bell marks the time, it is
Not music's time: a squad of sailors hammer
Paint from rusting plates in rippling beats;
The ventilators pour out noisy breath;
The public address calls, "Sweepers, man your brooms";

Each side, the bow-wake hisses like the fall
Of silver chains: But somewhere there is music
Edging through the sound of discipline
And cleanliness. That was Debussy's "Faun,"
Lost, though amplified, in modern life.

And now the Rose leaps through the window Weber
Little dreamed of; but our necessary
Noise of passage withers him to naught.
The boudoir is a drawing room; the garret
Hygienic where the chilly artist coughed.

The classic concept lives in dynamos,
And incantation will not charm it thence.
And yet, recall, there was a softer view,
The somersault of hearts, the mind's abeyance,
Sensuous webs—that, too, has been transformed.

In Paris cafés where golden gas-light steeped
The daring waxen bosoms with incandescence
The waiters now serve female lecturers.
Romance and wickedness cohabit sweetly
In those good bodies who yesterday

Kept their definitions strict and thrilling.
The faun? Perhaps that flying fish that skips
The slicing bow. The Invitation has been
Refused; the Rose, in truth, is spectre now.
Our course is secret; it is a time of war.

DIVIDENDS

We are bringing back some cancelled notes.
We have them here on the deck, in the bright sun,
With aluminum smears of ocean writhing under the heated
clouds.

This is a sort of report to the stockholders.
Each figure on the diagram represents one thousand.

Item: a sailor, leg cut off.
Credit: votes for irresponsible politicians.
Item: a soldier, right arm missing.
Credit: copy and blurbs for a depraved press.
Item: a marine, face gone.
Credit:

But am I boring you? You probably want
To clip your coupons and arrange a merger . . .
Madame, how was I to know that one
Of them was your son? They are everybody's sons.
Sir, you might consider it a buy on margin—
A sort of side bet. You won on the larger
Investment, didn't you? . . . Am I cruel? Bitter?
Rolling here on the furnace sea with men
Who came back from Saipan and Guam, who still can grin,
Seeing the ship point eastward through the burning
Haze? Cruel? To this man who never will cross
His legs again, to this one slowly learning
To smoke and eat with his left hand, cruel to those
Who faced what did this and are not here?
Or cruel to your civilian heart? Look.

No, no. Come look. Look at these men—these boys.
From their faces you could imagine they
Had kicked a goal in a freshman game.
But in the night, in dark, in silence,
What do their eyes see that were opened by fire,
What do they think that will not let them sleep?

This is the return on your investment,
The “good buy” the Brokers told you about.
It was so cheap; yours for only sloth
And the glorification of ignorance.
“Thank God, I’m just an ordinary man,”
You always said, and you scorned everything but money.
When you should have thought, you went to sleep.
When you should have read, you took the comic strip.
When you had to vote, you were in the movies.
When you should have acted a citizen, you acted a fool in a
 night club.
Well, death is ordinary, too.

How you have deceived your children! Yes,
These, on this ship coming home to your arms,
Where you hope to cure them with sweets
Of your pretty frightened view of America they fought to
 preserve.

You dare not let them think of America they fought to build,
For your investment is at stake. You might lose
Something. You need not bother about those bunks below—
That one where a skull is bandaged down to the mouth,
Around the chin a soft yellow down he would have shaved
Except he didn’t quite make it back home.

Think of yourself and of them, and judge
How your investment has paid.
These loans are cancelled forever.

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